

Wod

Silvia Tschui

Novel

German



In Wod, Silvia Tschui tells the story of a German-Swiss family and follows the intertwined paths of different family members from the period of the World Wars up to the present. The different episodes are skillfully interwoven and composed to a family saga that shows a multi-layered image of a family heavily marked by the experience of two wars.

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Author

Silvia Tschui was born in Zurich in 1974, studied German and graphic design and completed the literary writing course in Biel. She has done all the clichéd jobs for aspiring authors, apart from washing corpses. Since then, she has worked as an animated film director, teacher and journalist for various media. Her first novel *Jakobs Ross* was an award-winning bestseller in Switzerland, was brought to the stage and is currently being made into a film.

Photo: @Ringier/Jessica Keller

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Excerpt translated by Steph Morris

‘Fine,’ Charlotte says midway through the argument, flicking the indicator on. ‘Fine, I guess you’re old enough to understand. I should start with the diamond necklace – no with the potatoes, more like. I should start with my great uncles and the potatoes.’

Charlotte glances at her son as she drives. He’s not a child any more. He’s asking questions, has been for a while, but this time he refuses to let her fob him off or kick the can down the road. This time he opens the passenger door and says, ‘Now! Tell me now!’ Charlotte changes lanes immediately. Bob Dylan is still singing How does it feel... on the car radio as Charlotte pulls onto the hard shoulder. She turns the engine off and says into the silence, ‘Fine. The potatoes, on Lilli’s birthday... I really loved Lilli, you know, like you only love your grandma – back then anyway – and it all started with the potatoes on her birthday, at least for me it did, so for you too, really.’

A bowl of potatoes falls to the ground in front of Charlotte and smashes. Nis, her secret-service-great-uncle, in his early sixties, who always wears suits with medals on his chest that remind you of his job, smirks. The old scar shows up white on his red face, a thick line from his eye to the corner of his mouth.

Karl, her monk-great-uncle, stares at his older brother. He has just grabbed the bowl of potatoes and thrown it at Nis. Karl is beetroot red. It’s hard to believe that this national treasure, dear kind Brother Karl, held up as a saint in the press for his charitable work with down-and-out drug addicts, can lose his cool like this. Nis is still smirking. Karl reaches for the carving knife, wheezing. His great niece Charlotte watches him transfixed.

It was a little comment which provoked this conflict from nowhere, a comment Charlotte only learns years later, visiting secret-service-great-uncle Nis in another town for bereavement-related reasons which will become clear in a few chapters, by sitting

on a sofa and asking.

‘Tell me really,’ she asks, ‘what was it you said then to Uncle Karl?’ And Nis starts talking. He’s a polished entertainer, unstoppable, a walking history book in its final pages – even the notes in the margins could easily take all day and half the night.

Sometimes his wife mumbles something, beside him in her wheelchair. She always mumbles the same thing: ‘That wasn’t easy, you know, with my daughter on the bridge I...’ at which point she breaks off each time as if the end of the sentence were too ghastly to spell out.

Charlotte starts counting. Eighteen times she has started saying, ‘with my daughter on the bridge...’, seventeen times ignored by her secret-service-great-uncle, and once again Charlotte is amazed she’s never met their two daughters, who apparently live in a town only an hour from hers.

There’s been Scottish whisky and the clock is striking half one in the morning when the stream of words finally ebbs and Charlotte staggers out of the flat. She throws up in a bush as soon as the door shuts behind her, then totters back to her hotel.

The comment at the family party back then was: ‘Don’t take too many potatoes, your plate’ll get too heavy for you.’ Charlotte remembers now, she actually remembers thinking Karl must be ill, Nis just showing some concern, but Karl is wheezing in his habit and grasping the carving knife. Nis is still giggling, but has taken a few steps back. Karl lunges at him – Charlotte still standing there like a lemon – but now Lilli jumps in, with one big jump, and this although she’s seventy-five, this day.

It’s for her that everyone’s here today. In the grounds of her house overlooking the lake there are three long tables laid in the orangery. White-aproned men exchange the empty bowls of food for full ones. Ladies in hats and summer dresses converse with men in dinner jackets and various uniforms, and outside in the gardens the orchestra is ready to play in Lilli’s honour, the instruments shiny and golden, beyond them the blue of Lake Zurich.

Lilli is 155 centimetres tall and she encircles my monk-great-uncle along with the carving knife. She hugs her little brother, half-brother really, ‘Shush

Karl, shush little Karly, leave him be, just leave him.’ And now this stocky man in his late fifties starts sobbing, sobbing and wheezing. He’s short of breath, and Lilli, seventy-five today, can’t hold her little brother any longer.

The knife falls from his hand and he sinks to the ground. He blacks out and pulls Lilli down with him. ‘Boys, boys,’ she says, and ‘Karly, oh Karly,’ says his older sister and holds him,

although he’s very grown up now, four years old, and Lilli holds him, pretty Lilli, his big sister, half-sister really, who looks like his father and like him, pale and blond and funny and from the north not like his dark mother who’s always working and when she sees his shoelaces fraying in his fingers again, sighs, ‘If only you were practical like Nis.’

But now his Lilli has come to Berlin, ‘for the selection round, in case they have another gymnastics tournament,’ his father says at one point, when for once he hasn’t gone to the print shop at the crack of dawn. ‘Lilli made it to the finals of the last one!’

A huge honour, and Lilli is a hotshot at gymnastics, but Karl knows Lilli is a hotshot at everything. And really she has come to Berlin because of him. He sits on her lap on a broad gravel track outside the city and he’s allowed to hold the steering wheel.

Music begins, warm tones rise up, trumpets and fanfares. Lilli has been given a car. She was allowed to take her driving test on her eighteenth birthday, ‘Pretty much the only person in town,’ she claims, laughing; she’s been given a car, at twenty, his pretty big sister.

Karl is allowed to steer, and she says, ‘When I’m older I want to have a cute little Karly just like you,’ and then she sings a nursery song in various terribly silly voices.

And it’s him who’s allowed to go and stay with her in the north a year later, after the windows in the Berlin flat have been blacked out with dark fabric and blankets and cardboard for some while and you have to run to the cellar when the low flying planes come, and they keep coming, and his mother shoves him down the stairs yet again when he isn’t fast enough, when it

starts humming, and it keeps humming. In the cellar he and Nis hold tight to their mother who sits there holding them both, right and left, and none of them say a word.

Once a bomb goes off right next to them. The whole building shakes. Nis leaps up. Karl wants to hide his head in his mother’s lap as she sits, but she is already resting her head on Nis’ chest as he stands.

Nis is the first to be sent away because it’s dangerous for children, his mother says. He’s going to a farmer in the east and Karl stands with their mother at the station and watches as she tries to kiss Nis goodbye, with, ‘I’ll miss you terribly, little man,’ and, ‘Make yourself useful, work hard and make sure you check what needs doing yourself without them having to tell you!’

Nis pulls a tough face and ducks her kiss. He is ten and tall and can look after himself, he says, and their mother says she’s proud of him, so grown up. Nis turns round and boards the train.

He hasn’t even said goodbye to Karl. Nis stands in the compartment at the open window. Their mother reaches her hands out to him. Nis doesn’t take them.

And as the train pulls out, their mother stands there waving with both hands, a handkerchief in one, but Nis seems to have sat down. In any case, he doesn’t even look out of the window, and their mother waves and waves and Karl stands next to her, and only once the train has nearly left the station does a head pop out of a window, which could be Nis, but you can’t quite tell at that distance.

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